DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 059 PS 021 273

AUTHOR Honig, Alice Sterling
TITLE Infant Mental Health: Implications for Parenting in Limited Resource Families.
PUB DATE 2 Apr 93
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Plight of Young Children Conference (College Station, TX, April 2, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attachment Behavior; Child Behavior; Child Development; *Child Rearing; Economically Disadvantaged; Emotional Development; Infants; *Low Income Groups; *Mental Health; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parenting Skills; Parent Role; Parents; Parents as Teachers; Toddlers

ABSTRACT

Parents of babies have many tasks to master. Beyond basic physical skills needed to care for children, such as diapering or preparing formula, parents need emotional wisdom to relate to their child. Parents with limited resources should know that as long as they provide the emotional nourishment that babies need, their baby will flourish. The essence of quality caregiving lies in the emotional bond that is forged between parents and their child. Parent bonding involves parents' feelings of tenderness towards the baby and a deep investment in its well-being. Research has shown that early parent bonding facilitates babies' development of secure attachment. Caregivers need several special skills to help babies develop a secure attachment to them. Caregivers should be attentive and tender to babies. In addition, they should try to understand and cope with a baby's difficult behavior. Planning a baby's play and encouraging a baby's language development through conversation and reading aloud are also important. Caregivers should learn a wide variety of teaching techniques to enhance an infant's development. If bonding is to be successful, parents may have to free themselves from old prohibitions and feelings of shame. (MM)

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INFANT MENTAL HEALTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTING IN LIMITED RESOURCE FAMILIES [1]

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.
Syracuse University

New parents of infants and toddlers have a great many practical tasks to master. Diapering, learning to nurse baby comfortably, preparing formula or baby food for each individual infant, learning to nap when baby does in order to avoid exhaustion - such expertise forms the core of caregiver competence with a new baby. But these are only the rudiments, the basic **physical** skills! Beyond such fundamental physical lore lies the **emotional wisdom** needed to cherish and relate to each unique little baby whom the parent will care for, get to know more and more intimately, and hopefully become " crazy about" day by day. Babies flourish with a loving parent. They do not care if the parent is rich or poor, pretty or plain, brilliant or average. Babies are great acceptors of parents as they are. As

[1]Paper presented at the Plight of Young Children Conference, University of Texas, College Station,Texas, April 2, 1993

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long as parents provide the emotional nourishment that babies need, a baby will adore those special persons and think they are the most beautiful and best in the world. This is surely good news for parents with limited resources!

The first and foremost emotional neediness of a baby is for YOU the parent to become intimately engaged with the baby. Sure you will hold and cuddle, but you will also need to respond promptly and appropriately to infant distress needs. The essence of quality infant caregiving lies in the **emotional** bond you forge with your infant that helps you tune into your special infant.

Unlike adults, babies happily cope if they have more than one love partner in the duet of caring! Not only parents and grandparents but supportive childcare personnel can serve as intimate partners in babies' lives. Finding your way to create a leisurely love affair with your baby does not mean that you cannot share caregiving with a spouse or partner or loving family member, such as a grandparent. But it does take emotional skillfulness and a willingness to <u>become a pleasuring and pleasured partner in a love duet with your baby</u> (Honig, 1993a). Parent bonding means that the parent feels tenderness and deep investment in the well-being of the baby. Thus, if special problems, such as drug abuse or violence plague a family, then outside support is needed to help parents form strong and sensitive emotional bonds with the baby. Anger management is urgent where an infant is concerned. Shaking a baby because one is angry can result in severe brain injury and in death. Thus,

for stressed parents, community supports and outreach Home Visitor personnel must be provided so that parents can summon the emotional resources necessary for patient and competent ministrations for a baby who seems to need someone to care, not only all day, but often at night too.

Research has shown that early parent bonding facilitates babies' development of **secure attachment**. Toddlers who were securely attached to a parent as year-old babies later showed more flexibility and resourcefulness, more confidence in play mastery and more cooperativeness with caregivers in difficult tool-using situations (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978). So even when a family doesn't have much money or education, supporting baby's **secure attachment to each parent or grandparent is supporting the fundamental emotional task of the baby's first year.**

Let us look at some of the special skills needed to help babies develop a secure attachment to caregivers.

Practice tuned-in, tender adult partnering

Babies thrive on body loving, with lots of holding, draping, and lap time. Every baby needs an adult partner committed to a special bodily-intimate relationship (Honig,1990a; 1990b;1991). Babies need to drape on you, cling to you, mold onto you. Give your body freely to the baby's need to cling and cuddle. Your baby will draw deep strength from your body cuddling almost by magic, just as Goliath drew strength from long flowing hair in the Bible!

Tune into and respond promptly to your baby signals of neediness or distress. An upset baby is using a strong signal to tell adults: I NEED YOU TO HELP ME FEEL BETTER. Babies don't cry to bother adults. They cry when they are upset. When you soothe what hurts them, whether a urine-irritated bottom, a hungry tummy, or a lonely feeling that needs a cuddle, they learn to trust you. Then the world feels like a safe place to grow up, and it seems worth the effort to cooperate in order to learn what grown-ups want babies to learn.

Respect rhythms and tempos. Every baby has a different temperament style. Some are busy and active. Some are slow-to-warm-up and suspicious of strangers or unfamiliar foods. Some suck vigorously. Others are snackers and suck a few sips at the breast or bottle and then need to look around for a while. Some babies tolerate discomforts such as a hungry tummy or a wet diaper for a few minutes. Others yowl fiercely in despair if a parent does not meet their needs right away. Each baby is a special unique little person. As adults we need to understand and respect the rhythms and tempos of our babies so that we can have more tolerance for the normal ups and downs of their behaviors. A baby during the first year of life needs to know he or she can TRUST a parent to make things better when baby feels distressed. You cannot spoil a baby by picking up and comforting the little one. Indeed, research shows the opposite! The more promptly and lovingly babies' distress was handled early in the first year of life,the more attuned the parent was in handling the feeding

situation, the less babies needed to cry to communicate their wants by the end of the first year and the more easily the babies were able to accept being picked up or put down (Ainsworth, 1982).

Babies vary a lot in their rhythms and emotional moods. Some new babies wake several times a night for nursing and some seem to cry for longer periods each day (or evening!). The developmental dance of growth goes not in a straight line, but more wave-like. Some times are easier for babies; sometimes babies are more frustrated with what they want to be able to do but still cannot accomplish (such as use words to express needs). Then they may become more disorganized until they have worked through this period of developmental disequilibrium.

Keep Trying to Understand and Cope with Trying Behaviors!

Be FOR your little one. Your emotional bonding is a powerful force not only for promoting early secure attachment of a tiny infant in your care but also for sustaining trusting relationships during the "Terrible Two's", the second and third year of infant life. Toddlers may show wild mood swings and not seem to need as much cuddling and body draping as younger babies. They often run-run-run away mischievously when called to come to a caregiver. But when frustrated or tired they will passionately demand to be held or will fling themselves into your lap. If you have bonded well with your baby, if you have well and truly met the needs for comfort and for company, for food and for body-loving, then deep confidence in your cherishing will tide a baby

over. You can accept toddler mood swings and willfulness calmly and offer body loving when it is so needed. You keep your toddler's self esteem intact even as that child goes through crabby periods or absurd contradictions in wishes or in see-sawing behaviors.

Offer toddlers choices to avoid conflicts. ("Would you like juice OR milk?" "Would you like to sleep with your head at THIS end of the cot or the OTHER end?")

Toddlers will need you to remember that their rhythms and styles may not fit with family requirements for strict mealtimes or get-dressed-and-get-ready-fast times any better than the baby's individual sleep and eating rhythms fit in a year ago. Toilet learning and neat eating take longer to achieve for some toddlers than others. But if you trust a toddler's signals, you will be comfortable about deciding when to encourage more mature learning or when to accept a more leisurely pace for a toddler to practice, struggle with, and master new and difficult life skills. Keeping the trusting relationship intact provides a baby with life energy and good will to engage in positive peer relations, relate cooperatively later to other adults as teachers, and to strive for mastery in play. When a toddler starts to behave in contradictory and " ornery" ways, remember that she or he is testing the right to have separate ideas and wishes. If you keep your rules firm and your love generous, then both toddler and parent will survive this trying time.

Become a Skilled Play Planner

Babies need safe play spaces to creep and crawl and cruise holding on to furniture.

The most fascinating toys require a baby's **actions** in order to work or produce interesting results that will stretch baby's attention span and persistence : e.g. wind-up toys; xylophone; pegboard; puzzles; building blocks; pull toys, play dough.

Make life interesting for your baby. If you do not have much money, use ingenuity and "beautiful junk" . Ripped nylon stockings stuffed in a net bag that held grapefruits make a good hanging ball for a baby to bat at. Use empty dishwasher detergent bottles as play toys for tub time. Give baby an old magazine to flip through and point to pictures. Washed-out yoghurt cups are wonderful for stacking and banging together and filling with other toys.

Learning games to play with YOU as partner (e.g.peek-a-boo; patty-cake; ball rolling) especially entrance a baby.

Relish and Share Language Treasures

Aside from cuddling and gentle handling, your language interactions will eloquently reveal the quality of the relationship you have developed with your infant. A tuned-in-talking partner jabbers lots with babies during daily routines.

Converse with your baby. Respond to baby sounds. Treat baby's early sounds and coos as important. Show your genuine delight at early jargon babbling and at toddler attempts to

create one- and- two- word sentences. Embed turn-taking-talk into every routine daily activities, especially diapering and meal times (Honig, 1989). Early language learning is an important ingredient to ensure your baby's later school success. Talking to and tuning into the babbling of your baby cost nothing. But talking with baby shows that a parent cares and is determined to help baby feel that she or he is an important communicator and conversational partner in the family.

Unfortunately, some folks do not realize that baby babbling means a lot only IF a parent talks responsively back and forth with the baby. The more a parent treats early language sounds as important and as legitimate, the more baby will try to learn new words and use them to communicate as a respected little person in the family.Include your baby in family turn-taking talk.

Hook your baby on picture books. Salvation Army stores often have used children's books for sale. Choose cloth books, cardboard books, plastic books, homemade books. Read on the floor; read cuddled on a couch. Especially at the ends of days, when babies begin to wilt as the afternoon hours grow long, a loving snuggle with a familiar book can confirm for a baby your genuine sensitivity to times of grey moods or special needs for quiet intimate book sharing (Honig, 1985).

Read, label and talk about body parts, clothing, foods, cereal boxes, furniture, and ongoing caregiving activities.

Sing and use chants to explain to baby what is going on at the moment and what will come next during daily routines (Honig, 1993b). Tell baby what you are doing, how you are doing it and what comes next.

Talk about and model **prosocial** interactions: sharing, kindness, empathy, and patience. Read to your older baby about nurturing creatures such as Dr. Seuss' Horton the Elephant, even when you may have to simplify the story. Help your little one feel that being friends and caring about each other is deeply important in your family. Libraries have plenty of books just right for reading to babies. If reading is difficult for a parent with limited skills, then there are books with wonderful pictures that the parent can describe and make up a story while cuddled on a couch reading and looking at pictures with baby.

Confirm Loveliness; Confirm Joy

Bring beauty and loveliness into a baby's life with pictures, mobiles,colorful scarves and wall hangings, soft classical music, fragrant flowering bulbs, and slow waltzing times with babes in arms. Be alert to how wonderful and new the world is for a baby. Find a way to take baby for a stroller ride to a park to see flowers or put on classical music on the radio so baby can hear the beauty of violins and other instruments of the orchestra. **Aesthetics** cheers a baby's world and will make parents feel happier too.

Bring laughter into your own and your babies' lives. Giggling and grinning come early and easily to babies.

Enjoy this brand new world with your baby. Get in touch with the deep core of your own long-ago joy as a tenderly cherished baby (Kaplan, 1978) as you renew your awe at simple daily experiences (like watching iridescent soap bubbles or the wind blowing tree leaves on a branch) that capture the delighted appreciation of babies.

Learn a Wide Variety of Teaching Techniques

Perceptive cherishing will not alone boost the learning career of a baby. Techniques for enhancing early learning will be easier to master if you have gotten to know and appreciate the unique personhood of your infant. Below are some teaching ideas that will help babies learn and also boost your pride in your own splendid and subtle skills as a teacher of your infant.

Dance up and down the developmental ladders of learning (Honig,1982). Each developmental task may be more or less difficult for a baby. Each learning domain may be harder or easier depending on a baby's skills, learning style, attention span, and persistence. So many tasks have to be mastered - from learning to coordinate vision with prehension; learning to trust a special caregiver; learning to use many sensorimotor activities to experience just what a toy can do; learning to understand and communicate with words; learning to enjoy a variety of food textures - to learning to respond empathically with an upset comment "Baby crying!" as he turns to you anxiously when a peer is hurt or upset, or she hears a baby crying in another cart as you push your cart with baby in it through a supermarket aisle.

Hone your **noticing** skills. Notice how hard or easy each different task is for baby. If necessary, give a special boost to revive baby's interest. Arrange quiet spaces where a sitting up baby can keep on working and moving ahead with learning tasks, such as stacking blocks or fitting poker chips into a coffee can with a slit in the plastic top.

Give barely noticeable help sometimes: e.g. steady a stacking box so your toddler can succeed at the stacking task.

Be available, but not intrusive. Don't interrupt your baby's own efforts to explore, learn, sample, and experiment. You may want a toddler to put rings on the ring stack toy in order of increasing width. Right now, she may just want to experiment with getting them all on regardless of size. Give baby freedom to adventure with toys her or his own ways. Your goal is a baby's lengthened attention span and long persistence in working at a task, rather than perfect ring stacking (Honig & Lally, 1981).

Use admiring glances and positive talk to **lure** your baby into new tries and persistent work at a learning activity.

Help baby master certain **prerequisite** skills, such as staying dry for hours and saying toileting words, **before** you demand that she goes on to the next stage, toilet learning (Honig, 1993c). At feeding times, babies can only learn to eat neatly when they have good wrist control plus firm fist control of the spoon.

Bonding Well May Require Some Self-Searching

Sometimes freeing ourselves to bond well with babies means first freeing ourselves from old prohibitions and feelings of shame. Accepting the bodily needs of babies who drool, wet diapers, suck thumbs, and pat their genitals when undressed, may require that we re-examine and re-work old, anxious scripts from our past. Old Ghosts from the past can spoil our ability to act generously toward baby's neediness. If a parent neglected or hurt us when we were young, then some of these old scripts may still be lurking inside us waiting for a chance to take over. Banish the "ghosts" from the past that were harsh, indifferent, rage-filled and angry at the young child you once were (Fraiberg,et al, 1987).

As a parent with past griefs releases positive life energy instead to bring gentleness and attunement to the baby's needs, the parent can feel deeply: "I am righting ancient wrongs from my own life. THIS is how a baby SHOULD be loved. I can become the loving parent that I wish I had had long ago, rather than the parent who provided painful times for me."

Be proud of the priceless gift of cherishing. It cannot be bought for money. And parents with little in the way of money can be as rich as royalty in giving sensitive, skilled love to their baby. The meaning of poverty should be just that - lack of material goods. It should not mean a poverty of meaningful, affectionate relationships. Each parent can choose decisively to give rich meaning and warmth to a baby despite limited resources.

REFRAME IDEAS ABOUT BABY NAUGHTINESS

We often need to stop and think about babies' immature abilities to understand the messes they make and the exhaustion they sometimes leave us feeling. We must try to **reframe** some of our attitudes toward a very young child's misbehavior. What looks like "naughty" actions of babies may really be learning experiences as they attempt to find out how materials feel. Thus, a baby may solemnly squish a banana between his fingers as he tries to figure out the texture of this delicious object he is handling. Babies often try out through feeling and licking and banging and tasting what they can DO with objects. They figure out what" near" or "far" means as they droop or throw a toy and then peer over the edge of a high chair. Give baby safe ways to experiment with dropping, squishing, pulling, or rolling so that you do not have squashed food all over the floor frequently. Use an upturned basket for ball throws. Suspend yarn balls from a ceiling for batting and pushing.

Be sure to baby-proof your living space. A mobile baby will want to explore everything interesting, including garbage bags with colorful frozen food wrappers sticking out.Try to think hard how to keep dangerous objects out of the way and to avoid saying "NO" by putting precious breakables way high up out of reach. Saying "No" too much becomes nagging disapproval. Often, if yelled, "No" scares a baby. Try rather to tell a baby what she or he CAN PLAY WITH and SHOW YOUR ADMIRATION at new abilities, such as being able to nest pots and pans or bend down while

toddling and actually pick up a basting spoon (a fine toy) from the floor without toppling over.

Provide arms and a lap (the perfect refueling station) generously if a discouraged baby needs a boost to self esteem.

Find personal supports or pleasures to help **you** keep calm. When adults are contented and proud of their nurturing work, then babies will thrive in that aura of contentment.

Take deep personal pleasure in your ability to read signals and to tune in responsively to baby's different signals of neediness. Your trustworthiness in cherishing builds infant confidence, secure attachment, a sense of self-control, self-esteem, and good will (Erikson, 1950), and reflects your courageous commitment to quality parenting.

Parents whose troubles stem from neglect and abuse way back in their own childhood sometimes find baby-loving a struggle. As their scary ghosts lead to yelling, ignoring, or even threatening hurt, such parents urgently need all the help they can get from professionals and from caring friends and relatives. Parents need to be brave about asking for help. Professionals need to be alert to providing supports and perhaps "surrogate parenting" for some families. Together we can help babies flourish emotionally!

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